

Secular Arab Discourses

Latest since 9/11, narratives about the Arab or more broadly the Muslim world have been dominated by terms like “Muslim terrorist,” “Islamism,” or “political Islam. These narratives, however, are only part of the story and completely overlook and ignore secular thought that gained popularity in the late nineteenth century and remained dominant in Arab political and intellectual discourses for the largest part of the twentieth century and regained momentum in recent protest movements.

The seminar explores the main trends of secular discourses in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries through academic literature, articles and essays written by Arab intellectuals, and Arab novels that display a wide range of secular thinking, particularly in younger generations’ attempts to liberate themselves from the social restrictions of traditionalist society.

The seminar is geared towards a range of students with a more specific interest in the Middle Eastern region, International Studies, and political ideas and theory outside the West.

Course Requirements

Essay	10%
Research paper	40%
Weekly Responses	20%
Presentation	10%
Participation	20%

Essay: Each student is expected to complete one approximately 5-7 pages essay. The short essay is designed to allow for an early exploration of the research paper’s topic. Particular attention should be given to formal criteria of essay writing such as a well-defined research question, the argument’s consistency, introduction, and conclusion. The essay is due in week eight and is meant as a tool to internalize requirements of a research essay and eventually to help you getting started on the research paper. The essay should build on the readings we have discussed during the first six weeks of class.

Research Paper: Students who are enrolled in the seminar will write a 20–25-page research paper (40%). The deadline is December seven days after the last session. Please deliver an electronic copy through Canvas. Students are free to write on any topic related to the course, but the paper must relate directly to the themes of the seminar and address. The final essay needs to have a clearly defines research question; documentation must be consistent and in accordance with academic standards. The research paper can build on the previous essay.

Weekly Responses: Students are expected to write critical responses of one page maximum (double-spaced, typed) on the assigned readings. The critical responses are meant to foster discussion of the texts. Do not summarize. Rather, problematize an aspect of the reading you like to explore further, you find particularly interesting (explain why), or you object to (explain why). The weekly responses are due in class as hardcopy. Summaries without any critical reflection are at best B-work.

Presentation: During the course of the semester, students are expected to make one presentation (10%). This presentation should be a critical engagement (NOT simply a summary although some summary of the

main arguments will be required) with one of the core readings. The presentation should last about 10 minutes. The presenter is advised to distribute a handout that could also be a collection of controversial quotations taken from the reading. The presenter will be responsible for initiating and moderating a class discussion for about 20 minutes.

Participation: Students are expected to be current with the reading assignments. The course is designed as a seminar. There will be no formal lectures, but rather the primary classroom work will be discussion of the assigned reading for the week. The professor will facilitate and direct discussion, and sometimes offer relevant background or conceptual information. Each student will be expected to contribute on a weekly basis to the debate and interchange within the class. Participation will be graded on the level, quality, and frequency of participation.

Grade Scale:

100-93: A	92.99-90: A-
89.99-86: B+	85.99-83: B
82.99-80: B-	79.99-76: C+
75.99-73: C	72.99-70: C-
69.99-66: D+	65.99-63: D
	62.99-60: D-

Required:

- Al-Azm, Sadik Jalal. *Critique of Religious Thought: First Authorized English Edition of Naqd al-Fikr ad-Dini, With a New Foreword by the Autor*. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/j.ctt1df4htn>
- Al-Azm, Sadik Jalal. *Is Islam Secularizable? Challenging Political and Religious Taboos*. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/j.ctt1s474sm>
- Aziz Al-Azmeh. *Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas, and Consequences*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/10.3366/j.ctv10kmdtw>
- Boullata, Issa J. *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990. http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=7430&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_COVER
- Choueiri, Youssef M. *Narratives of Arab Secularism*. London: Routledge, 2023. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/10.4324/9781003158356>
- Corm, Georges. *Arab Political Thought: Past and Present*. translated by Patricia Phillips-Batoma and Atoma T. Batom. London: Hurst, 2020. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vt/detail.action?docID=6006831>
- Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. (Hardcopy required) ISBN 978-0231144896
- Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *Enlightenment on the Eve of the Revolution: The Egyptian and Syrian Debates*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/10.7312/kass17632>
- Meguid, Ibrahim Abdel. *Clouds over Alexandria*. Cairo/New York: Hoopoe, 2019. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vt/detail.action?docID=6165604>
- Latifa Al-Zayyat. *The Open Door*, trans. Marilyn Booth. Cairo/New York: Hoopoe, 2017. (Hardcopy required) ISBN 978-9774168277
- All further required readings will be available through Canvas.

Course schedule

Week 1: Introduction to the Course

Reading: Choueiri, Youssef M. *Narratives of Arab Secularism: Politics, Feminism and Religion*. London/New York: Routledge, 2023, Introduction and Part I (pp. 1-54).

Week 2: Making Sense of Key Terms and Concepts

Readings: Al-Azmeh, Aziz. *Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas, and Consequences*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, chap 1, section 1 and 3. Boullata, Issa J. *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, Chap 1 and 2. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, Chap. 1.

Week 3: From the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century: Three Narratives

Reading: Choueiri, Youssef M. *Narratives of Arab Secularism: Politics, Feminism and Religion*. London/New York: Routledge, 2023, pp. 55-235.

Week 4: Early Liberation Thought

Readings: Amin, Qasim. *The Liberation of Women*, in: Amin, Qasim. *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism*. Translated by Samiha Sidhom Peterson. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1992, 1-106. Yared, Nazik Saba. *Secularism in the Arab World (1850-1939)*. London: SAQI, 2002, Chap. 1-6.

Week 5: Secularism in Law, Society, and State

Reading: Al-Azmeh, Aziz. *Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas, and Consequences*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, chap 4. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. – Corm, Georges. *Arab Political Thought: Past and Present*. translated by Patricia Phillips-Batoma and Atoma T. Batom London: Hurst, 2020, pp. 71-84.

Week 6: The Struggle for Liberation in Fiction I

Reading: Al-Zayyat, Latifa. *The Open Door*. translated by Marilyn Booth. Cairo/New York: Hoopoe, 2017, Chap. 1-11 (pp. 1-179).

Week 7: The Struggle for Liberation in Fiction II

Reading: Al-Zayyat, Latifa. *The Open Door*. translated by Marilyn Booth. Cairo/New York: Hoopoe, 2017, Chap. 12-end.

Week 8: A True Reformer (Short essay due)

Reading: Husayn, Taha. *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. translated by Sidney Glazer Washington, D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1954. Not required further reading: Ahmed, Hussam R. *The Last Nahdawi: Taha Husein and Institution Building in Egypt*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021.

Week 9: After the 1967 Defeat

Readings: Al-Azmeh, Aziz. *Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas, and Consequences*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, chap. 5. Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, Chap. 2, Critique After the 1967 Defeat, pp. 48-115.

Week 10: Secularism and Social Change after the 1967 Defeat in Fiction I

Reading: Meguid, Ibrahim Abdel. *Clouds over Alexandria*. Cairo/New York: Hoopoe, 2019, Chap. 1-5.

Week 11: Secularism and Social Change after the 1967 Defeat in Fiction II

Reading: Meguid, Ibrahim Abdel. *Clouds over Alexandria*. Cairo/New York: Hoopoe, 2019, Chap. 6-end.

Week 12: Two Late Twentieth Century Discourses

Reading: Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *Enlightenment on the Eve of the Revolution: The Egyptian and Syrian Debates*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

Week 13: Al-Azm's Radical Kantian-Marxist Critique

Reading: al-Azm, Sadik Jalal. *Is Islam Secularizable? Challenging Political and Religious Taboos*. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014.

Week 14: Turning Towards the Twenty-first Century and Summary

Reading: Corm, Georges. *Arab Political Thought: Past and Present*. translated by Patricia Phillips-Batoma and Atoma T. Batom London: Hurst, 2020, pp. 237-263. –Al-Azmeh, Aziz. *Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas and Consequences*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, Chap. 6.